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AUTHOR Zenger, Amy A.
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ABSTRACT

In Portland State University's Freshman Inquiry program, 5 teachers, each from different disciplines, meet weekly to design the syllabus and the assignments used by all of the sections which are designed around the theme of "The City: Visions and Realities." A participant observer takes field notes and studies these for ways to extract program goals. These goals are to teach communication skills, to foster inquiry and critical thinking, to raise awareness of ethics and social responsibility, and, in addition, to create a climate of diversity and multiculturalism in the classroom. The program has focused on ethnic groups issues, with student groups creating oral presentations from one ethnic group's viewpoint, and reading and writing on this subject. Some questions that arose were: Can the writing process and criteria for good writing be derived from, or transferred to, other tasks and activities such as the creation of graphs, or the filming and editing of videos? Should all of the teachers in a collaborative teaching situation give the same assignment or not? Teachers have different goals and different passions--perhaps the assignments should be varied to reflect this; and how might a writing assistant best fit into a class like this one? (CR)

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Amy A. Zenger

Portland State University

Portland, Oregon

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ED 403 579

Writing in Action: Observing Students and the Teaching of Writing in the General Education Curriculum

For the last ten weeks I have been one of two participant observers in Portland State University's Freshman Inquiry program. Initially, our naturalistic study was only intended to describe the way writing appears in the new general education curriculum here, but soon it expanded to be a look at all of the stated goals of the program, because writing can hardly be winnowed out from all of the activities in the classroom. First, I would like to tell you about the class I am observing and how it is structured, and to talk about my experience as a fieldnote taker. Then I would like to bring up a few questions that might help us get started on a discussion.

The class is one of five sections designed around the theme of "The City: Visions and Realities." Five teachers, each from a different discipline (Geography, Math, Administration of Justice, History, and Theater Arts), meet weekly to design the syllabus and the assignments used by all of the sections. Each professor has his or her own class of about 30 students, and each class is further divided into three smaller groups that meet two times a week in small computer labs. My class is taught by Charles Tracy, from the Administration of Justice department--an expert on crime--and the small sections are

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taught by the class peer mentor, Melissa Jillson--a Senior majoring in Psychology. Teachers often attend each others' classes, and the five professors and five peer mentors also meet together for one hour a week.

I have been taking field notes at the faculty meetings, the large class meetings, and one peer mentor section. I try to record as much detail as I can about what is said, where people sit, and generally what goes on in the meetings; then I code the notes, studying them for ways that the goals of the program emerge, and looking for other patterns that might show up.

The stated goals of the program are to teach communication skills (including reading and writing, numeracy, and computer literacy); to foster inquiry and critical thinking, and to raise awareness of ethics and social responsibility. The program also aims to create a climate of diversity and multiculturalism in the classroom, and to build community within the university and between the university and wider society. Besides these stated goals, other patterns have emerged from the fieldnotes and entered into coding such as pedagogical talk, gender issues, storytelling, and housekeeping--the list will continue to grow, I'm sure.

This term, the City Visions classes have focused on ethnic groups who are immigrants to the city, and on the myths, stereotypes and realities of these groups, emphasizing reading and presenting statistics as a way of knowing groups in the city, and emphasizing oral communication. Students worked in groups of five or six all term to create an oral presentation showing the city through the eyes of a particular group--through the eyes of African American police officers, for example, or through the eyes of

alternative musicians, or the eyes of homeless youth. Besides spoken reports, the presentations also used slides and overheads, recorded interviews, original videos, and a lively skit.

Other class projects involved reading an autobiography or novel that deals with a particular ethnic experience in the city; creating a graphic representation of one's genealogy on the computer; creating charts and graphs to show statistics visually; and keeping a journal--three pages a week. There were two assigned texts: a historical geography of American cities and a history of immigration in the US.

Reading and writing are being used and taught in a much more complex situation here than in traditional writing classes. The complexity of the situation itself requires quite a bit of writing for the professors and students to collaborate with each other, often by using e-mail: Professors send each other drafts of syllabi and assignments and discuss them later in the faculty meetings; students both turn in assignments and are given feedback by e-mail. Cross-disciplinary work also creates different kinds of writing assignments: students are asked to write an explanation of a series of graphs comparing the population growth of three different cities or to write a description of the genealogical chart they created on Superpaint. (As you may have gathered by now, computers are used heavily in these classes.) This term, the largest project was not a written paper, but an oral presentation; students were expected to compose the report in a series of informal drafts, and to write a summary of it afterwards.

In terms of the teaching of writing, a major limitation I see the class face is lack of time, the natural result of the time-consuming process of collaboration. This affects

writing instruction by limiting peer response, teacher response, and revision. Also, teachers are having to learn to teach so many new things all at once: writing is only one of these things and sometimes it seems to get lost in the storm.

As a participant observer, one of my primary concerns has been to be accepted by my class and to work out the way I am a participant in the situation I am observing. This hasn't been easy, since my role is so ambiguous; I have been given trust by both teachers and students, and am, in a sense, an emissary from a different department. I find that this and the unfocused nature of the inductive process are naturally confusing, and demand a greater commitment of time and emotion than I had expected. All of my notes are open to the people I am writing about, however. My hope is that they may find them useful, since I know I have learned so much from being present in their classrooms.

Some questions that have occurred to me are: Can the writing process and criteria for good writing be derived from, or transferred to, other tasks and activities, such as the creation of graphs, or the filming and editing of videos? Should all of the teachers in a collaborative teaching situation give the same assignments or not? Teachers have different goals and different passions--perhaps the assignments should be varied to reflect this. How might a writing assistant best fit into a class like this one? Even just having me present, scribbling constantly in my notebook, may have heightened consciousness of writing. I think this is a good thing, especially for the teachers, since the many things they learn teaching this Freshman class are things they will take with them when they return to teach in their own departments.